

# Customer empathy, humor help ensure good service



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## Curriculum vitae

As Frederick Community College's associate vice president for customized training, Trenton Hightower oversees the training needs of more than 5,000 employees at 75 area companies. Mr. Hightower is a board member for the National Council for Continuing Education and Training. With a bachelor's in communications and public relations, and a master's in administration of higher education, Mr. Hightower still maintains his best education was basic training at Fort Benning, Ga., home of the Army's Infantry Branch.

■ *Second of a two-part series on customer service from both the business and customer point of view.*

By TRENTON HIGHTOWER

In last week's article entitled "Customers find poor service is norm," we talked about the state of customer service. Good customer service, I maintained, has become the exception rather than the rule; in fact, I argued, customer dissatisfaction has become the norm.

Last week, I focused on the service providers' role in improving the customer experience. We looked at the need for managers to model exemplary customer care for an entire generation, many of whom may never have experienced truly good service themselves.

We touched on the power of body language, facial expressions and eye contact in every transaction, and the importance of thorough training to equip employees with the tools needed to raise the customer experience to the next level of excellence.

In this week's column, I want to explore the other side of the equation: the customer's responsibility

for a good experience. Our role in this process is more subtle, but it is still very significant.

Minimize annoying encounters by keeping in mind a few simple rules:

### Know your environment.

Before you go into a sales or service situation, ask yourself "Is this an incentive-driven environment?" If you've entered a used car lot, a furniture store or an electronics franchise, the answer is probably "yes."

Get ready. Your business is about to be courted aggressively.

These employees are paid by commission — forewarned is forearmed, however. Before you get irritated by an overly attentive sales staff, you can remind yourself that they're only doing their job, and voice your "just looking, thanks" intentions with less hostility.

### Don't be adversarial.

On the other hand, in an environment that isn't fueled by incentives, finding help can feel like hide and seek. So what do you do when you finally track a salesperson down? As frustrating as your experience has been, the ultimate encounter will be far more positive

if you don't lose your temper.

Manage the encounter to accomplish your goal.

Remember your purpose there! Suppose you've had to wait your turn to be helped by an overworked salesperson.

As the saying goes, you'll catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. Empathize without opening the door to a diatribe of negativity. Show respect for the individual's time. Most people will be naturally inclined to respond in kind.

### Humor goes a long way.

I had an interesting experience recently at the National Spy Museum. After waiting in a long line, I finally got up to the ticket window.

Obviously bombarded with customers, the employee selling tickets didn't even make eye contact. Without a greeting of any kind, eyes still downcast, he muttered, "What'll it be?" I decided to take a risk, and tease this probably-good-hearted-but-less-than-engaged employee a little.

I stepped back and said enthusiastically, "Thank you for that rousing greeting to the National Spy Museum!"

My sarcasm wasn't lost on Mr.

Ticket Man, who smiled sheepishly, sat up a little straighter and visibly regrouped.

"Let's try that again," he said. "Welcome to the National Spy Museum. How may I help you?"

Not every situation could be resolved as easily or as amiably, but it's worth a try. Humor goes a long way toward defusing potentially difficult situations.

It's also worth it to recall that most employees have discretionary decision-making ability that they can choose to leverage on your behalf — or not. Within the parameter's of each person's job is typically an assortment of services or add-ons they can extend to add value to the transaction.

When you manage the encounter with respect and courtesy, you will be far more assured of being offered these "extras."

Like most interactive processes, there are two sides to the customer service story. Individuals on both sides of the equation have a responsibility to do whatever they can to create a good customer service experience.